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ABSTRACT

In mainstream U.S. culture, the idea of gender as a philosophical or spiritual value independent of sex is notably absent, and the presence of the masculine and the feminine in all of us is overlooked. In contrast, the concept of balance and compensation between the fundamental gender-defined energies of the universe is deeply rooted in American Indian philosophy and belief. The role of the feminine in American Indian culture provides insights into how American Indian people define themselves and their society. In early times, the primary responsibility of child rearing and education lay with the tribal elders. In this setting, a child's perception of gender roles became more generalized, not being limited to experience derived from parental contact. Female spirit and power have traditionally been recognized in ceremony, political power, and legend, and have influenced American Indian governance and social organization. Within each of us there are all capabilities. Our young people are on a rampage today because they sense something is missing in life. What they lack is something to do with their heart and spirit, with a true understanding of the meaning of life, with a way of living that embraces both masculine and feminine energy and releases potentials stifled by stereotypes and mainstream social conditioning. Holistic appreciation of tribal wisdom can help to generate the range of solutions necessary to reshape the world for our children and those yet unborn. (SV)

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Woman Spirit: Feminism and the American Indian

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One of the most interesting accounts of the consideration of gender as a perception of human values independent of sexual orientation, meaning the idea of gender as a philosophical or spiritual value among people of European origin, can be found in the writings of the English author and critic, C.S. Lewis. In his novel, Perelandra, Lewis discusses at length the idea that the masculine and the feminine represent sources of definition and reconciliation which are inherent to the universe; that birth, growth, change, protection, nurture, and death were aspects of existence which could be assigned a defined role in the scheme of the natural world according to a gender-oriented value, that life itself has both a masculine and a feminine face.

Lewis' speculations were rooted in his understanding and interpretation of the historical writings of the Roman Catholic Church, and unfortunately not upon the social or political realities of the time in which he lived, or for that matter, upon our own time. There is a notable absence of recognition of this paradox among members of the mainstream United States culture. Gender and sex have come to be defined as synonymous, as illustrated by the conscious social effort put forth in recent years to independently empower both men and women as uniquely

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identifiable sexual beings, as opposed to any concerted effort to reaffirming the masculine and feminine in all of us. Mainstream culture deals with either perpetuation of, or reaction to, a male dominated language, psychology, and set of social definitions.

That is not to say that the issue of gender in contemporary United States culture does not have a significant nexus for further discussion. The concept of balance and compensation between the fundamental gender-defined energies of the universe is a way of thinking deeply rooted in American Indian philosophy and belief. Indeed, a better understanding of the role of the feminine in American Indian cultures can led us to significant insight into how American Indian people define themselves and the workings of the society in which they participate.

In early times on this continent, American Indian children were taught by their elders: the tribal leaders. The biological mother and father did not have the responsibility of child rearing. They had not lived long enough, seen enough, experienced enough, done enough. This most important of all social tasks was never left to chance. It was the responsibility of the most honored and knowledgeable segment of society - the elders.

In this kind of a setting, a child's perception of gender roles became more generalized, not being limited to experience derived from contact with parents, so that children developed models of behavior based upon the requirements of an entire population and not upon the need to define oneself independent of others. Boys becoming men did not seek participation with other

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men because, "My father hunts and so I must hunt.", but diametrically because , "Men are hunters and so we hunt."

This generalized framework was further subject to the cumulative wisdom of an entire clan. Within the scope of the teachings of a particular tribal group, all Creation had a place within the life force, and that place was determined by who your mother was. Naming your mother and the women of your lineage - those who formed you - allowed others to know your place within the world: culturally, spiritually, personally, and historically. Your significance, your relationships on earth, your relationship to all creation was determined by the knowledge passed on by the females - the keepers of the ways, those who maintain relationships.

Female spirit and power is recognized, valued, and feared by bands, tribes, and nations of Indians. We speak of equity. The Cheyenne have a saying:

> We will not be conquered until the hearts of our women are on the ground.

This expression is a recognition of feminine endurance, as well as a testament to the fundamental importance of the function of women as standard-bearers of basic familial and tribal values.

Feminine energy and power has traditionally been recognized in ceremony, political power, and legend. She is Old Woman, Grandmother Moon, Spider Woman, Corn Mother, White Buffalo Woman, Changing Woman; she weaves, she teaches, she remembers.

Emphasis upon recognition of the role of the feminine has also

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influenced American Indian governance and social organization, as exemplified by specific provisions of the Iroquois Constitution.

Within the Iroquois Confederacy [Article 44]:

> ...woman shall own the land and soil. Men and women shall follow the status of their mothers.

[Article 45]:

> Women's heirs shall become chieftain and reflect upon their mothers, and those mothers shall be known as noble for all time to come.

[Article 19]:

> The disobedient Chief who persists in his disobedience after three warnings by female relatives shall have the title removed by order of the women in whom the title is vested. The women will then select another of their sons to act as chieftain.

To understand woman spirit and power is to know resistance, to know survival, to know meaning and relationships. It is to know ourselves.

Within a tribe are members with all capabilities. Within each of us there are all capabilities. Both men and women were and are warriors. It has been my observation that the caregivers of our society are warriors; they care and protect. Our young people are on a rampage today because they sense something is missing in life. What they lack is something to do with their heart and spirit, something to do with a true understanding of the meaning of life, a way of perceiving balance and function within the

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sphere of living which embraces both masculine and feminine energy, and releases the potentials which are locked away behind a wall of stereotypes and accepted mainstream social conditioning.

The civilization that evolved on this continent was never understood by the strangers who came to this land. It is believed by many that the knowledge of this land and its people can redeem United States society. I believe that observation is correct. Acceptance of a range of possibilities is often as valuable as focusing on a single solution, and a more holistic appreciation of tribal wisdom related to the significance of gender as a factor in shaping cultural perceptions and values can help to generate the kinds of solutions which are necessary to reshape the world for our children and those yet unborn.

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